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ABSTRACT

In 1993 in Australia, a 7-year qualitative, longitudinal study called the 12 to 18 Project was begun to study young people and the development of their gendered identity, as well as schooling's contribution to social inequalities. This paper considers in what sense "class" is a useful concept in pursuing the questions the study started with, and in the design, methodology, interpretation, and reporting of such a study. The paper presents a historical overview of the idea of "social class," describes the 12 to 18 Project, and delineates some of the interviews with the Project's participants. It suggests some of the questions the researchers found interesting both about young people in school today and what is happening to them, and about literature on class and where its contribution and problems lie. (Contains 6 notes and 20 references.) (BT)

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by

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In what sense is 'class' still a useful concept?

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In 1993, with Julie McLeod, I began a seven-year qualitative, longitudinal study of young people in Australia. The *12 to 18 Project*[i] was intended as a longitudinal study to investigate (i) the development of young people's gendered identity in Australia now, and (ii) schooling's contribution to social inequalities: the way in which different schools interact with and produce differentiated outcomes for different types of young people. It was a project inspired by the fact that we had both spent many years studying education, gender formation, inequalities, changing cultural and policy discourse and wanting to design a new type of study to take us further with these interests. We set up this study in four schools drawing students from different social backgrounds, and twice a year for the past six years we have interviewed 26 male and female students at these schools about themselves, their thoughts of their future, their views on their school and their life (Yates and McLeod, 1996; McLeod and Yates, 1997 ; McLeod and Yates, 1999; Yates, 1999a). The question I want to consider in this paper is in what sense 'class' is a useful concept in pursuing the questions we started with, and in the design, methodology, interpretation and reporting of a study such as ours.

To some extent an interest in class differences of some sort was built into our study: we set it up in four schools chosen to represent different socio-economic settings and to give the opportunity to consider a school's interaction with students from different backgrounds and different schools' interactions with students from similar backgrounds. But to some

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extent also, our methodology implied a certain inductive openness about what we would say about class and whether it was a relevant concept to emphasize. We aimed to have close-up interviews with boys and girls about their views of themselves, their school, their future, and to trace what happened to them, but the identities and what happened might be describable with a greater emphasis on gender or ethnicity or in some other way.

Historically, 'class' has been an important lens through which young people have been differentiated, studied, represented and explained by researchers, but today there is considerable uncertainty about whether that lens can continue to be used, and considerable ambiguity about what it would mean to do so. In this paper I will be discussing some of the theories and debates which are the context for the project, as well as some substantive examples taken from the project. The intention is to reflect both on the salience and on the highly problematic nature of talking about 'class'. Even taking 'class' in terms of its own traditions of inquiry, we would need today to be alert to new forms of class relations, class identity, class outcomes. And from the perspective of alternative significant perspectives on experience and schooling such as feminist ones, we would need to consider what are the conceptual limits of a class analysis (or a neo-class analysis, such as that of Bourdieu).

But the issue itself, the interest in the way in which 'class' is a relevant category of representation and analysis enters into consideration of

- how do we represent the meanings, constructions, values, imperatives that each individual subject is working with?
- how do we understand their engagements with schooling and the schooling 'effects' over this time?
- what emphases do we give to our story in terms of individual specificity and social patterning, and in terms of reproduction and change?

Background

The idea of 'social class' was developed by Karl Marx in the 19th century to analyze the social form of *industrial* society. It was produced specifically for nation states in which the major part of the population (or at least of the male population) was either an 'owner' of the means of production, or an 'employee' in factory systems. It was a concept linked to explanations of how one part of the population continued to maintain its dominance and

power over the other (through 'ideology' or ways of seeing the world, and not just direct force), and of the potential of that other part of the population to discover its common interests, uncover the forms in which it was being exploited, both materially and ideologically, and rise up to change these.

At the beginning of the 21st century, we have a world which is radically different from the industrial nation-states of the 19th century: in the forms of global capital, in the importance of knowledge and service industries; in the radical reshaping of what production means in an age of information technology, and so on. In terms of social movements, and in terms of academic theory, we also have a world which no longer takes for granted that 'labour' is the key principle of social organization and division: movements around gender, race, ethnicity, national identity have attained prominence, while the significance of unions and labour in the old sense has declined. (Mac an Ghaill (1996), for example, notes that in Tony Blair's 'stakeholder society', there is an absence of the concept of the working class, and that the 'Labour Party' has turned its back on the concept which gave it its name. Similar debates are common in Australia.) Even more significantly, there has been a considerable rejection of the type of intellectual project from which class analyses in the Marxist tradition stemmed. In postmodern society and postmodern analyses there is disenchantment with the modernist faith that the key principles of social organization and social change can be uncovered. Instead there is an interest in deconstructing the commonsenses; giving voice to subjugated perspectives; telling stories of various sorts; but without believing that if done adequately these could ultimately find a single truth or key explanatory principle.

But, as many writers about 'youth', especially in the context of education, have found, it is not easy to simply do without some type of concept that talks of class even if it does not try to pin this down or work it into an overall explanatory theory. For one thing, the statistical picture shows that 'socio economic status' (usually judged by a combination of factors such as parents' occupation and education; locality; income level) is one of the strongest predictors of school retention rates, achievement at school, extent to which students continue to university or to further education, types of courses and careers and universities they go on to enter.[ii] To talk of 'class' here rather than looser concepts such as 'SES' or 'poverty', is to ask what material, relational, and discursive contexts and

processes produce such a pattern. As Mac an Ghaill argues, 'one of the major effects of 'bringing back in' class analysis, is that it will give a critical edge to discussions employing discursively-produced key 'common-sense' constructs' (Mac an Ghaill, 1996, p.171).

In terms of education, especially university participation, many researchers begin from a sense that 'class' is an observable experience as well as a statistical fact. As a result of researchers' experiential knowledge that this type of social difference matters, it has been common for ethnographers to set up studies (as we have), looking at a school in a poor area, or in a rich area, without trying to pin down the way in which what they find represents something that might or might not be called 'class'[iii]

A return to an interest in 'class' is seen in a number of feminist studies of young people, often related in this case to an interest in the emotional and epistemological interactions that comprise the research act, and the researchers' own beliefs that their own childhood experience was of a 'working class' kind that has effects on the constructions they engage in today. Valerie Walkerdine's work (1989, 1990) has made an immense contribution to this type of interest and analysis, and other recent work in this vein includes Reay, 1996; Steedman, 1993; Skeggs, 1997; Mahoney and Zmroczek, 1997. These writers tend to show that, experientially at least, 'class matters'. The feminist work has added important dimensions to the pursuit of what a 'class' focus looks at: not just the ways of being associated with a particular formative family context, but the psychological relations set up by these. Diane Reay, for example, has noted how

> working class women's hopes and desires for their children to succeed academically are indissolvably linked to vistas of loss and separation. They are about risky enterprises in which the losses could outweigh the gains.. they also inevitably include elements of rejection of self.
>
> (Reay, 1996, p.452)

What is sometimes less clear, in research, which is so strongly framed by autobiography, is whether generational and historically specific changes in the form of class and the significance and effects of those experiences remain similar or also change. In our study,

we are studying young people who are at school in an era where school completion has become a more mass phenomenon than it was a generation ago (from two-thirds not completing school to over two-thirds who do); where popular culture, television, clothing may have reduced or at least change the significance of certain styles as markers of class; where different types of jobs have developed, and exiting ones have been radically transformed in content and relative status (teaching has gone down in status; being a chef has gone up); and where the parent's lives themselves may be changing as parents lose jobs or themselves go back to study. So although the researcher's own painful experiences may open insights into the psychology of the young people, we need to take care not to simply be looking to re-tell our own, historically-specific, stories. Our project captures some glimpses of ways in which some experiences of working-class girls and mothers may be changing, and some dynamics of middle-class girls and mothers and fathers may be intensifying, and I will discuss these examples later in the paper.

Another question which arises from feminist work on class, work that has been specifically generated by what is named as a 'working class' formation of the researcher, is whether this interest in exploring class as a psychological (and gendered) experience can be extended to studies of all young people, or whether it is something relevant only to a particular group whose experience of being 'othered' is best named as a dynamic of class. In Australia, the great majority of young people are somewhere 'in the middle' (as distinct from the term 'middle-class' which is often used to describe a particular set of experiences that contrast with 'working-class' experiences). This large 'in the middle' group has not been given such extensive attention by sociologists and ethnographers[iv]. Are there particular 'class' relational experiences to be shown here, analogous perhaps to an initial silence, then investigation of 'whiteness'? The 12 to 18 Project was designed to give as much attention to this less identified 'middle' as to the more immediately recognizable class experiences which inhabit the literature.

And then there is Bourdieu. Bourdieu's work is attracting a new wave of interest in recent years and I think there are a number of reasons for this. First his work has spawned a concept which now seems ordinary but which remains a brilliant core insight to the operation of education, the idea of 'cultural capital'. Secondly, his work is a major attempt to capture the way in which individual subjectivity and social structure and institutions are

mutually formative (the work on habitus, practical reason, 'reproduction' and 'distinction'). Thirdly, the specificity of his analyses of French society, in works like *Distinction* and *The State Nobility*, give a differentiated and subtle account of socio-cultural groupings, and contemporary formations of taste and trajectory (though whether this approach works as well in the early 21st century as it did in the 1970s; and whether the framework is equally robust in countries like Australia and the USA as it is in France, England, Japan, are open to further investigation)[v]. It is work that does try to give a total, though not totally determinist, picture (in the sense of a way of understanding the way individual perspectives/behaviour are shaped, the patterns of group outcomes, and the principles of overall social formation and institutional operation – particularly the institutional operation of schools and universities).

Bourdieu's work is highly evocative for educational research, not surprisingly given that he is a social theorist who sees the operation of education as a key locus of social analysis. So, in what sense, is he talking about 'class'. Here is one set of his statements about this:

> The principle of classification thus put into play is genuinely *explanatory* [...] it fixes on determinant properties which [...] allow for the prediction of the other properties and which distinguish and bring together agents who are as similar to each other as possible and as different as possible from members of other classes, whether adjacent or remote. But the very validity of the classification risks encouraging a perception of theoretical classes, which are fictitious groupings existing only *on paper*, through an intellectual decision by the researcher, as *real* classes, real groups, that are constituted as such in reality. [...]
>
> The model thus defines distances that are predictive of encounters, affinities, sympathies, or even desires [...]
>
> *But this does not mean that they constitute a class in Marx's sense, that is, a group which is mobilized for common purposes, and especially against another class.*
>
> The theoretical classes that I construct [ie around cultural and economic capital, and using concepts of social space, social field, habitus, etc] are, more than any other theoretical divisions (**more, for example, than divisions according to sex, ethnicity, and so on**), predisposed to become classes in the Marxist sense of the term.
>
> (Pierre Bourdieu, **Practical Reason**, Polity Press, Cambridge 1998, pp10-11; italics in original, bold added by me; the final paragraph follows on immediately from the preceding one.)

This somewhat ambivalent statement by Bourdieu raises a number of interesting issues for our longitudinal project. Though setting up his explication as different from traditional

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class analysis (not built around a simple 19th century binary), he makes a differentiation between foundational building blocks of his analysis (economic and cultural capital and the habitus associated with these) and elements which are not foundational in this sense, "sex, ethnicity and so on". *Is* this what we would find when we interview male and female students of different backgrounds over the seven year period?

To sum up these background reflections. At this particular point in history, if we look at the literature, we find considerable diversity in how class features in discussions of youth. Sometimes it is used in the Marxist sense, as a relational concept, and as a means of understanding group interests, which are structured in opposition to each other. More commonly today, it is used simply as a means of classifying differences of economic and symbolic capital, and as a basis for tracing educational and life opportunities in terms of these. For social theorists, attempting to understand changes in the economy, technology, culture, nationhood, the meaning of what 'class' is as part of that pattern is posed as a question. In the literature on gender, ethnicity and race, 'class' comes in as a way of not 'essentializing', or a way of trying to address differences which are not reducible to a single one. In the feminist literature (as well as in an earlier literature on education dominated by male working-class sociologists), discussion of 'class' can be a way of attempting to recuperate the pain in the autobiographical experiences of the researcher whose origins were a long way from their current social milieu. Each of these discussions suggests issues which may be taken up when we go to the interviews, trajectories, and comparisons which our project has set up.

The 12 to 18 Project

I have discussed some methodological issues relating to the treatment of class and the design of our project in earlier papers (Yates, 1999b; in press; forthcoming). Here I want only to reiterate briefly that in intention this was a project about biography in interaction with schooling. It was designed to understand meanings and subjectivity but also to contribute to the much broader issue of how social opportunities are created; how schooling produces and reproduces inequalities. Unlike many previous projects concerned with 'class' and education, the 12 to 18 Project was set up to enable study of students from similar backgrounds attending different schools, and students from different backgrounds

attending the same school - that is, to not conflate class and school; and to allow some study of different forms of 'working class' or 'middle class' experience (in taking different localities). The project set out to track the differentiated pathways and career directions taken by these young people as they made their way through school, with some openness about the extent to which themes of gender or ethnicity or class would emerge as important in these.

In this part of the paper I begin with some examples arising from comparisons between what students were saying at different schools, and relevant to a type of issue familiar from the work of Bourdieu and a broader body of sociological studies of schooling, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. I try here to show the continued salience of this perspective, and to point to some dynamics observable between the group and school 'in the middle' as compared with the poorest site and school in our study. But I also then go on to consider in what way our readings are changed or interrupted when we set this against a focus on gender, and take into account the changed social backdrop in relation to jobs.

We set up the study in four different school sites, and became interested in the way the subject offerings of the different schools were read by the students. At the private school, students saw themselves as benefiting by having a well-equipped school (*'Like in a state school you probably wouldn't have two really well kept ovals and a swimming pool and tennis courts, netball courts, basketball courts, stuff like that'*) and a wider than normal range of 'options', though the breadth in this case was in the arts (and in fact the participation here was not optional but compulsory). The students in year 7 did only a single computing period per week, and no other manual technical subjects. Students commented on how poor the teaching of computing was (*'that was shocking', 'it was like a free period', 'I don't think he's ever like used a computer before'*), but not one student commented generally about the lack of technical and manual studies.

One important feature of class in its traditional and also Bourdieuian sense is that is a *relational* concept, not just a descriptive one. Schooling effects and social outcomes are created not just because young people have more or less of the goods required (materially,

and in terms of know-how), but because the schooling and the social world is operating in terms of a mode which produces and reproduces the unstated things that matter:

> We cannot understand the symbolic violence of what were once hastily designated as the "ideological state apparatuses" unless we analyze in detail the relationship between the objective characteristics of the organizations that exercise it and the socially constituted dispositions of the agents upon whom it is exercised.
>
> (Bourdieu, *The State Nobility*, 1998:3)

In the case of our study, what students brought to the school, what the school itself did, and how the school was located in its community and its history, all mutually constitute a way of making invisible what might otherwise be seen as a lack – the school's relatively impoverished computer offerings.

Again, echoing Bourdieu's work on 'distinction', this is how one student explained for our benefit what was the point of the breadth of activities they did take:

> It's like introducing you to other sports so, in case you want to learn them later, or you go to a place where a lot of people play it and you want to join in.
>
> (year 7 male, Domain Private, CM.94b)

At another school in our study, the school which had been a technical school, it was a different story. In addition to English, mathematics, science, social education, languages, physical education and home group, students, in the course of their first year, studied textiles, home economics, systems technology, information technology, 'keyboarding', 3D art, sheetmetal and woodwork.! Most of these technical-manual subjects were included in students' nominations of their favourite subjects, and when they were asked their views of other schools, they nominated the lack of such subjects as a negative:

> *Christine* and then if it's like in an all girls school you don't get to do the subject like sheetmetal work and all that. And they're some of my favourite subjects, so...
> *Ellen* You don't have like woodwork, sheetmetal and all that.
> *Christine* Like there's a whole tech work you wouldn't know. *[TSPE.94b]*

On the other hand, in terms of the beginnings of a secondary pathway which will see many more of these students drop out of school, the following exchange, on how technical studies are rated in the education pantheon, is somewhat ominous:

What do you think this school thinks is important?
Keren: Maths [...] kind of science, maths, social ed and English [...] They sort of think them subjects are the main ones, even though, you know, most people don't like the main subjects. *[TSPE.94a]*

In these two examples, taken from the two extremes of the four schools in our study, we see differentiations being made which tend to reconstitute and constitute at least some elements of the social order (see also Richard Teese's recent discussion of similar matters, Teese, 1998). In our longitudinal study, we found that by the fourth year of the study, the ways students talked about certain things had been shaped by their particular school in a way that would tend to reproduce the relative positioning of the students who entered it. At the most elite school, every student responded[2] to a question about unemployment by saying that it was basically due to people not trying hard enough to get work; while at a high school in a suburb nearby, every student responded by saying unemployment was due to general economic conditions, or immigration, or things other than the individual's own efforts. In other words, the first students had learnt/had reinforced to some extent to 'misrecognize' their own social advantages and to take up an unsympathetic stance to those who lacked these. The students in the second school had learnt/had reinforced a stance of progressive fatalism that had them competing less vigorously for school success.[vi]

Not only what is being learnt in a particular institution, but the student's own reading of what their respective mastery or lack of exposure to certain things represents, contributes to the future paths they will go on to take. The girls who liked the technical subjects both disavowed an envy or wish to be part of the type of school seen by outsiders as superior, yet also reinstate the hierarchy that has been disavowed in their perceptions of the academic subjects as being the ones that matter. The point is made even more explicitly in another part of the interview:

'Would you prefer to be at a private school?'
E: No way.
C: No
K: No.
'Why wouldn't you, E?'
E: Um, 'cos [because of] all the snobs. Um, no I wouldn't fit in.

[2] I am heavily summarizing here much longer answers to 'open' questions.

[They go on to tell about a cousin who was sent to a private school and rebelled and got expelled. They interpret this as being forced to do something you wouldn't like, and understandably then you wouldn't work.]

K: Like you wouldn't like it, because you don't want to get sent there and your parents make you. You know, you don't do any work, or you just start smokin' or something like that.

C: And then if it's like in an all girls school, you don't get to do the subjects like sheet metal work and all that. And they're some of my favourite subjects, so..

'And so it would be boring? Because...'

E: You don't have like [have] woodwork, sheetmetal and all that.

C: Like there's a whole tech work you wouldn't know.

(year 7 girls, BSE.94b)

Another school in the study is a high school, in the same town as the technical school mentioned above, a town with a very prominent range of private schools. The students here constantly tell us of ways in which this school measure up to the private schools. In *every* interview students respond to a question about how the school compares with other schools, by mentioning that the school has a boat shed, and takes part in a rowing competition with private schools.

The interview that follows (with female students in year 7) is characteristic. It suggests the subjective yearning to be judged as like private school kids; the false (from our experience) rumour mongering that the other schools are distinguished by being dirtier or having more smoking or worse teachers (rather than simply having a different history); the problem that even getting a better set of year 12 results does not count as much as having a boat shed:

'what do you think the school thinks is important?'

B: Um, I don't know. Probably our appearance and what the public thinks. They're always saying you've got to make a good impression on the public and that.

J: And a lot of people call in and complain about things, about the school, yeah. And I was surprised because I thought the school was pretty good and had a pretty good reputation.

L: They expect a lot from us, because they're saying the school has a good reputation.

[...]

'how do you think this school compares with other secondary schools?

J: It compares pretty well, like we raced in the boat race.

L: I raced in a boat race this year, I was a cox. Well we came second in our finals, and I think we did pretty well to be up there with them, like it was...

B: ...all other colleges and stuff, because like..

J: Bowen College..

L: Yeah, we raced against all private schools.

J: Yeah, and all the kids from other schools have opinions about the other kids from other schools. Like we'd call kids who go to like the expensive schools, like Bowen College and Bowen Private...and we'd call them posh, and they'd call us Westies. Even though we're not, they'd just call us like Free or something. Yeah, just 'cos like, they think that if we go to... 'cos there were these kids and they were teasing me, they were saying that our parents didn't have enough money to send me to a private school. Like, I think Bowen High School is just as good as they are.

L: I think Bowen High School's better. Because our boat sheds are really good. Some of them College boat sheds aren't too good. And they'd say to us...

J: Yeah, the boat shed is really cool.

L: Yeah, it's got two stories in it.

J: It has a really nice window and everything.

'How do you think this school compares B?'

B: Um, oh well the rest, like schools like College, like they're more strict...

J: So are we.

B: Oh, some of them, like from schools like Bowen Tech, they're all a bit, you know, they swear and they're smoking, but people from College, you don't see them smoke as much as what you do from schools like Bowen Tech and that.

'How do you think your school compares to the non-private schools?'

B: Oh, I think they're all pretty much the same.

L: I think our school's got a better reputation, 'cos like Bowen Secondary...

J: They might have a higher VCE pass rate.

L: Yeah, they have a higher VCE, but they don't have like a too good a reputation. 'Cos all fights and stuff break out over there, and it's a dirty school. That's what a lot of people say and that. So I think we have a better reputation than a lot of other schools.

J: I think probably some of the best high schools in Bowen are probably College and Bowen High, and Bowen Private and all this. But I wouldn't want to go to Bowen Tech or Bowen Secondary, because they haven't got very good grounds and buildings. Some of them, oh they have a few, but, and stuff. Oh, there's just a rumour that they haven't got very good teachers, and all of them smoke and dare other people to smoke, so they start smoking.

L: Yeah, it's just a dirty sort of school.

(BHL.94a)

In the sense that these extracts reflect, I think 'class' is part of the story of what is happening to these young people in Australia today in a study of their biographies in interaction with their schools. The point is not simply a descriptive one, that social distinctions matter. Broader social forms are being built up through the discourses and processes of schooling and different possibilities are being constructed for different young people in the course of school. In the case of this third school, our longitudinal study reveals that its huge emphasis on 'being as good as the private schools' not only entails a lot of overt disciplinary work (compared with the first school quoted, where both the school and generations of parents have produced a taken-for-granted ease that does not

require constant explicit attention and disciplining), but reminds us of Diane Reay's comment

> My father always told his children, "you are just as good as anybody else". We all knew that encoded in that phrase was a subtext that we were not.
>
> (Reay, 1996:453).

But while, in the sense just discussed, social hierarchies of individuals and of knowledge might be being mutually recreated through school, this is not the whole of the story. From the point of view of our study, two further questions are (1) when we read the interviews attending to gender or ethnicity does this simply add to the story around cultural and economic capital that Bourdieu sets up or require different organizing principles for representing the processes over the six years? and (2) have the changes in knowledge, technology and the labour market disrupted how we should read the significance of the biographies and the schooling? There is room here only to sketch very briefly some ways in which these issues are being explored further in relation to our project.

From the earliest interviews, we were struck by the highly self-reflexive and self-monitoring mode of the middle-class girls. (I am using the term 'middle-class' here to denote the girls from more professional and more wealthy backgrounds – the naming of the classes has a long history of discussion in Australia, but is not the subject of this paper.) Even at age 12, they would frequently comment ironically on something they had just said; or monitor and adjust their stance with an eye to our imputed reaction. For example, one girl, talking about her hopes for the future, talked at length about travelling the world, being a part-time barrister and part-time photographer, and then paused and said she also really wanted to go and help the people in Somalia. Another talked at length about her desire to get married young and have children and her fantasies about her future house. This was unusual among the girls we interviewed of that age, and the girl herself not only talked at length of these dreams, but immediately also discussed at some length how she knew this was an aberrant ambition. Others recount incidents with their fathers or with a teacher where they have been hurt but have taken care not to hurt that person's feelings by making them aware of it. Others interject and comment from our assumed perspective on something a friend says. The type of presentation of self I am summarizing here was not

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present to the same extent either with the boys in the study or with girls from poorer backgrounds.

To go back to my questions: how do we understand what is producing the patterns we see here? How do we understand the significance of these patterns relative to school success and to the contemporary labour market? Sociologists like Bourdieu and Bernstein and social theorists like Anthony Giddens have talked about the reflexive modes of certain fractions of the 'new middle class', and, from a quite other perspective, so has Carol Gilligan, in naming what she sees as a dynamic in girls' moral reasoning. Our study suggests that this mode is much more apparent as a gender/class phenomenon, and that it does have both psychological dimensions and educational and social effects. As the study has gone on, we have seen this stance of self-monitoring and self-scrutiny take both productive and negative effects on different girls in terms of conventional climbing towards success and high status. Negatively, it can produce inability to work when friendships fall out; or such intense self-criticism that little is done. But in terms of an overall pattern, girls from these backgrounds are doing extremely well in school: school is asking more and more for sensitive and positioned readings in the curriculum, and these girls can produce this. In the workforce too, 'people skills' are in high demand.

It is possible then, that reading the stories of the 'middle-class' girls in our project, lets us look at the joined dynamic of class and gender, but also lets us question and extend Bourdieu's claims quoted earlier. In old-style 'class' terms, the women here may be achieving a new positioning in the social order and may, indeed see themselves as having some common interests of a type that Bourdieu claimed was not so discernible by 'sex..'

Taking examples from the segment that looks most like the 'working class' also provide cases in which we hear echoes of the work of both the feminist and non-feminist theorists of class, but also glimmers of historically specific changes. For example, consider Sonia. When we first interviewed her, at age 12, Sonia is working hard helping her mother run a caravan park, cooking, looking after younger siblings, dealing with a stepfather who makes her uncomfortable, but whom she does not want to talk about. In grade 6, Sonia is animated and smiley, likes reading and writing, is looking forward to high school. A year

later, she is in high school, and less enthusiastic about it. She cannot think of anything much that she likes about herself, but can easily list the things she doesn't like:

> Well for starters I want these braces off; they're annoying me. Plus I want my teeth fixed before I do that. I want to get rid of these freckles. I want different hair. I want to be a little bit thinner. I want, what else? Yes I can say even longer hair…

Sonia wants to do well at school, ideally to become a kindergarten teacher or a chef, but she is uncertain about her ability, and by the time she is 14 or 15 is talking about the future in terms of 'taking it as it comes' – a common theme among the students from this school. She talks about school being too hard. At the end of year 9, in a word association exercise, Sonia answers 'childcare' to both 'job' and 'future'. She is unhappy, cannot talk about it, 'it is like a doorway I've locked and can't find the key'. Read in terms of the British feminist literature on working-class women, we would emphasize this fatalism, self-doubt, that thread through Sonia's story. Read through Bourdieu's eyes, we could pick out the themes of her puzzlement about what school really wants of her. Over the years of interviews, she mentions hopes of particular jobs, but also retreats and expresses doubt that she will make it. She seems deeply unsure of her ability, especially academic ability, and seems to have experienced periods of violence and bullying both at home and at school. She consistently makes clear that any dreams of 'a big house' or of 'working in a big place with my own office' are fantasies, and not things she thinks would happen..

But, Sonia's way of talking about these things belies what seems like a strong determination to keep in there, to keep taking the next step. Unusually for this school, Sonia is still there in year 12, now talking of wanting to enter nursing Over the six years we have interviewed Sonia, her home life also experiences changes. Her mother returns to the local technical college to study to become a social worker. The family move from the caravan park, and the unwanted (probably violent) man is no longer in their life.

How should we interpret the dynamic that has produced Sonia's path through school? Is this just the story of this individual, or is this part of a pattern of change involving many working class women, at least in this part of Australia, a story in which the changes in Sonia's mothers life are an important dynamic in Sonia's story? It is not that we can

answer such questions by focussing simply within Sonia's story, but such questions are relevant to the issue of what Sonia's experience means, or why it takes the trajectory it does.

The British feminist work helps us to notice the psychology, emotions and family dynamics of the class experience. What it often tends to obscure is any generational changes in this class experience or location. In our study, we have been struck by the extent to which a number of girls from roughly 'working class' backgrounds are managing their lives through their teenage years: handling a boyfriend who may have left school, or be in trouble with the law, even seeing him every night, and yet not letting that stop them keeping their own studies afloat; filling their lives with a huge range of activities: paid work, sport, domestic chores, boyfriend, study, and yet handling all of these. In a number of cases, these girls seem to have recognized opportunities of the newly reconstituted labour market – the significance of the hospitality industry for example; in others they keep very traditional dreams of becoming a respectable teacher of young children.

What I have tried to do in this paper is to suggest some of the questions I find interesting both about young people in school today and what is happening to them, and about literature on class and where its contribution and problems lie.

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[i] The *12 to 18 Project* is being carried out by myself and Dr Julie McLeod of Deakin University, with major funding from the Australian Research Council, and additional support from the University of Technology, Sydney, Deakin University and La Trobe University. For other discussions of this project see the reference list, and especially Yates and McLeod (1996) and McLeod and Yates (1997).

[ii] A range of research on this is discussed in articles such as Mac an Ghaill, 1996; Lamb, 1998. It is true that patterns can also be shown in terms of other categorizations, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and, especially, indigeneity, but even with some of these patterns, many analyses continue to stress the way in which some form of consideration of class is important. For example, in the burgeoning debate in Australia about whether it is boys rather than girls who are 'disadvantaged' at school, many commentators note that working class girls do considerably worse than middle class boys.

[iii] Watson (1993) has made a number of good critical points about the untested assumption of many ethnographic representations here, and I have discussed these further in previous papers (eg Yates, in press).

[iv] The best-known Australian study of class in relation to schooling (and an early one to build gender into the picture), was *Making the Difference* (Connell et.al., 1982). But this study chose to focus on what it called 'working class schools' and 'ruling class schools' – the extremes.

[v] For example, are the rapid changes of finance and power we are seeing now with e-corporations disruptions to his overall framework rather than simply a new form within this?.

[vi] They were also learning to/ developing ways to position themselves in discursively differentiated ways in relation to racism, and a paper on that issue (McLeod and Yates) is in progress for presentation at the AARE conference in December of this year.

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